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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: THREE DISSIDENTS RELEASED AFTER SERVING FULL TERMS; ONE
POTENTIAL EARLY AMNESTY

REF: A) 07 HCMC 906 B) 07 HCMC 1220

HO CHI MIN 00000130 001.2 OF 002

Summary: Over the past few weeks, two of the dissidents arrested and convicted during the 2007 crackdown on nascent pro-democracy groups, Huyen Nguyen Dao and Phung Quang Quyen, have been released from prison upon completion of their full sentences. Post is attempting to confirm an MFA announcement regarding the early release of a third dissident, Tran Thi Le Hong, who was expected to serve out her term until December 2009. Meanwhile, contacts report that several imprisoned activists have gone on a hunger strike in Dong Nai, demanding improved prison conditions. Post is reaching out to the families of the dissidents in hopes of speaking with them about their experiences and will continue to closely monitor their situations. End summary.

1. (SBU) Post has confirmed the release of political activists Huyen Nguyen Dao and Phung Quang Quyen, both of whom have served their full prison terms. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced Dao's February 15 release from Xuan Loc prison in Dong Nai province during a February 19 press briefing. Dao, a freelance Internet journalist and member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), was arrested in August 2006 and sentenced in May 2007 to three years in prison for "conducting propaganda against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam" as defined by Article 88 of Vietnam's Penal Code. In August 2007, the HCMC People's Court commuted Dao's sentence to 2 years and 6 months in prison (ref A).

2. (SBU) Members of the United Workers and Farmers Union (UWFO) confirmed the January 17 release of Phung Quang Quyen, a UWFO and For The People Party (FPP) activist based in Dalat who was arrested in November 2007, tried at the same time as fellow UWFO activists in December 2007, and sentenced to 18 months in prison for "abusing democratic rights to infringe upon legitimate rights and interests of individuals and organizations" under Article 258 of the Penal Code (ref B). Quyen's sentence was upheld after an appeals trial on February 25, 2008. When asked why Quyen had not been released in May 2008 after 18 months' served, a UWFO spokesperson said Quyen remained in detention longer because he was undergoing medical treatment.

Potential Early Amnesty for UWFO Activist

3. (SBU) In a February 13 letter to the European Commission, the MFA also confirmed the release of a third UWFO and PDP activist, Tran Thi Le Hong, as part of the country's Tet amnesty. Post is trying to verify this news through our contacts. Hong's release from Xuan Loc prison in Dong Nai would represent an early amnesty of approximately nine months, since she was not due to be released until November 2009. According to ConGen contacts, Hong is one of the founders of the UWFO arrested in Dong Nai in December 2006 for her involvement in several labor strikes.

Along with Quyen and other UWFO members, Hong was convicted in December 2007 and sentenced to three years in prison for "abusing democratic rights to infringe upon legitimate rights and interests of individuals and organizations" under Article 258 of the Penal Code. Hong's sentence was also upheld after an appeals trial on February 25, 2008.

PDP Prisoners on Hunger Strike

14. (SBU) In a separate development, a Bloc 8406 member informed post on February 20 that PDP prisoners Nguyen Bac Truyen and Le Nguyen Sang, UWFO prisoner Tran Quoc Hien and FPP member Truong Minh Duc have gone on a hunger strike at Xuan Loc prison in Dong Nai. The hunger strike started on Feb 16 in support of the prisoners' demands for better prison conditions, including the right to cook their own meals, spend more time outdoors and receive greater access to television and newspapers. (Note: During Poloff's September 2008 meeting with PDP and UWFO family members in HCMC, they reported improved prison conditions for all PDP members prior to ConGenoffs' visit to assess prison labor conditions in June 2008, noting they had been moved into a communal cell and given lighter duties raising vegetables and cooking for other prisoners in the cafeteria. End note.)

15. (SBU) Of the approximately 24 known political activists who were arrested during the GVN's 2007 crackdown on dissidents, five fled to Cambodia upon fear of arrest, three were released without trial, and three (including Dao and Quyen) were released after serving out their full sentences. Hong's case represents the only early amnesty. Several key figures, including Father Ly, Nguyen Van Dai, Le Thi Cong Nhan and members of the PDP and UWFO, remain in prison.

16. (SBU) Post is attempting to contact the released prisoners in order to learn more about their experiences in prison as well as their involvement and activities in various political groups. Dao has declined to meet with Poloff at this time, citing the

HO CHI MIN 00000130 002.2 OF 002

need to recover and spend time catching up with relatives. Post will continue to monitor their situations and report on any surveillance and harassment by authorities.

17. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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